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ABSTRACT

In order to move away from reliance on a single questionnaire in university course evaluation and move towards a more formative evaluation, a method was developed for helping a team of instructors specify and evaluate their course and program goals. The method involves small group workshops in which instructors are asked to describe their program and state their objectives, in terms of student behavior. Discrimination training on clarity of objectives is provided. Written statements are then circulated to all instructors to test consensus. An application of the method to 30 instructors in a medical school department is discussed. (Author)

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A Method for Generating and Evaluating Course or Departmental Objectives [1]

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Introduction

If course evaluation in universities is to contribute substantially to the improvement of student learning, it must move away from reliance on a single questionnaire given to students at one point in time. This type of evaluation does not often provide a sufficient amount of detailed and timely feedback needed to develop an instructional system nor does it provide complete summative information to assess courses as complex educational programs. A more formative evaluation is needed if significant changes in course design and outcomes can be expected.

Most of the current theories of formative evaluation involve the specification of objectives and goals which must

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themselves be evaluated as an early step. Goal specification and evaluation can be a beginning point for the formative evaluation of a university course or departmental program. To fill this need, a method was developed for helping a team of instructors (e.g., a department) specify and evaluate their goals. The method was developed as part of an evaluation of the program offered by a relatively large Department at McGill University. More than 30 instructors were involved in an application of the method. The authors served as evaluation consultants to the project.

Attempting to generate and evaluate departmental goals with a group offers special problems of reaching consensus. Even when one is consulting with an individual instructor, departmental goals may need to be clarified before course goals can be specified appropriately. This would be particularly true of courses in a sequence. Previous experience of the authors in working with large ($N < 5$) groups of instructors revealed the same problems one encounters in cocktail party discussions over art objects or political candidates: different philosophical points of view, differing amounts of prior experience in discussing the problem at hand, and various levels of interest in the general topic make consensus rather difficult if not impossible, to achieve.

So it is with getting groups of instructors to agree on the collective objectives of their field of expertise. Some instructors feel that stating objectives is essential to designing and evaluating instruction; others feel that the "good" students will manage to discover what they need to know. Some instructors are quite preoccupied with discussing educational matters, whereas others feel quite differently. Also, some instructors have had direct experience in writing objectives, while others have not.

Description of Method

The method, which might best be called "Divide and Conquer," is outlined in Figure 1. The method involves a series of discussion-workshops which were held with small

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Insert Figure 1 about here
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groups of instructors (3-6) meeting separately and representing different aspects of the departmental program. Small groups of this size have been found to encourage discussion and reduce some of the negative effects of large group discussions, which can be dominated by a few speakers. These workshops lasted only one and a half hours each, but were designed to be task oriented to prevent rambling discussions. The purpose of workshops was to provide informal training

on how to specify objectives and to generate a first draft of written objectives for the course or program represented by the group. Emphasis was on fluency, that is, generating as many objectives as possible, and objectivity in stating course outcomes. Therefore, instructors were asked to a) describe their sections of the program in terms of student and teacher behavior and b) state their objective in terms of student behavior. One of the long-range purposes of these workshops was to be able to document for future evaluation any discrepancies between course descriptions and course intent.

Participants were encouraged to make verbal statements of objectives during the workshops. The consultants probed for further clarification and attempted to train discriminations between poorly-stated and well-stated objectives. Each group had a chairman who was responsible for preparing the written statement of objectives developed in the workshop. He sent a copy of this statement to the consultants after the workshop for a further check on the form of the objectives (e.g., whether they referred to actual student behavior, whether they were clear).

It should be pointed out that chairmen of these groups were chosen by the Department chairman and the major criterion for these choices was previous experience in "educational

matters." Several of the group leaders had previous experience in writing behavioral objectives and naturally this made the process work more efficiently.

The consultants then rewrote those objectives which were unclear, asked group leaders for clarification when necessary, and compiled a list of objectives generated by all of the groups.

This list was then circulated to all members of the department and each one was asked to comment on their relevance, clarity, and redundancy by making editorial comments in the margins of the document containing the list of objectives. These comments were then brought to and discussed at a meeting of the entire department. The consultants then collated comments and rewrote unclear objectives. Also, objectives judged as universally "irrelevant" were removed from the list. A final "objectives evaluation form" was then developed using the revised and shortened list of objectives. This form allowed each instructor to rate the relevance of each objective and suggest the most appropriate method of instruction for the objective (see Appendix).

Discussion

A surprising amount of redundancy among the objectives for different parts of the program was uncovered by this method. In addition, for the first time, adequate written

descriptions of what was expected of instructors and students in each aspect of the program were generated. The intent is to use the written statements of objectives for a variety of purposes within the departmental program. They will be useful in designing exams, informing students at the beginning of the course about the objectives, and also in surveying student reactions to the program. The latter could include student ratings of the clarity and relevance of objectives and the degree to which they were actually implemented and achieved.

Applications of this method promise several benefits. The method introduces university professors to the concept of objectives in a relatively painless way. It promotes open discussion on goals and brings clarity to statements of objectives since many instructors examine them. It brings the evaluation consultant into close personal contact with staff members and the content of the courses. It provides a written statement of objectives useful for many other purposes. Most of all, perhaps, the method sets into motion a more complete and formative evaluation that seems to strike more deeply into course design than evaluations which rely on student questionnaires and open departmental discussions on "how things are going."

In addition, this method promoted the notion that

objectives determine the appropriate method of instruction rather than the reverse. It appears to be politically viable in that all members of the department have direct input into the process.

One change suggested by this experience would be to begin with a short workshop for the group leaders on stating objectives. While several of the leaders had experience in this, others didn't. The more the subject matter experts know about the procedures of designing and evaluating instruction the more effective and long-lasting the results of such a procedure are likely to be.

Similarities and differences between this technique and that of the Delphi technique developed by the Rand corporation (Gordon and Helmer, 1964) and elaborated by a number of investigators (e.g., Turoff, 1970; Pfeiffer, 1968), was pointed out to the authors after the project was underway. The Delphi technique suggests several refinements that are appropriate for particular settings. If the department or instructors involved have a history of poor communication or internal divisiveness, the small groups used in the current method may not function well. In this case, the individual questionnaire approach of Delphi would reduce the negative effects of problems in group communication. Delphi questionnaires are completed anonymously and tabulations do not identify individuals or even subgroups of individuals who favor certain objectives. Also, Delphi usually includes the documenting of

minority opinions (by way of brief written arguments) along with tabulations of ratings on objectives of a group. This information is fed back to each member, who is then asked if he wishes to change his rating and to again state his reasons for changing or staying with his earlier rating. Delphi sometimes results in a strong set of pros and cons rather than group consensus. In contrast, the current method may create a false consensus by applying group pressure to persons expressing minority opinions in workshops or departmental meetings.

The importance of having outside consultants in the current technique or in Delphi is dufficult to judge. it would seem that only an exceptional person could be both departmental member and objective data-gatherer and summarizer. Outside help may increase the effectiveness of such a process but may also cause some resistance to the implementation of such a method in some university settings.

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Figure 1

Ordered List of Procedures

1) Department chairman (or course director) meets with consultants to decide if the method is appropriate for the needs of the department or course. Department Chairman (or course director) chooses group leaders perhaps using guidelines of the consultants, for groups representing segments of the course or curriculum.
2) *Consultants conduct workshop for group leaders on stating objectives.
3) Consultants meet with each group ($n < 6$) to generate objectives for a segment of the course or curriculum.
4) Group leaders send lists of objectives to Consultants.
5) Consultants revise list in consulation with group leaders and form composite list of department objectives, which are then distributed to each member.
6) **All members of the department meet to discuss composite list.
7) Consultants prepare objectives-evaluation rating sheets. (See Appendix)
8) Department members evaluate objectives.

* Not actually used in this case study, but suggested as a result of this experience.

** If many disagreements, strong minority opinions, or evidence of group communications problems have appeared by this point, a procedure similar to advanced states of the Delphi technique may be needed here rather than a large group meeting. Individuals would respond independently to the list of objectives.

Appendix

Objectives Evaluation Form

Directions: Below you will find the objectives recently generated by your department. Will you please rate each objective by checking the appropriate category. By rating an objective "relevant" or "irrelevant" you would be agreeing that the department, not necessarily you, should or should not teach the objective. If you think that further discussion or clarification is necessary, please check "uncertain" and use the "comments" space accordingly. Further, please check the appropriate method of instruction for each objective. If appropriate method is not listed, please describe under Teaching Method.